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The Mirror Pamphlets



The Eugene Field Myth

BY

WILLIAM MARION REEDY



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THE EUGENE FIELD MYTH

BEING A PROTEST AGAINST
THE SILLY, SENTIMENTAL
APOTHEOSIS OF A MAN
AND WRITER. ❀❀❀❀

THE EUGENE FIELD MYTH.



WHEN William Ernest Henley arose in his place and entered vigorous protest against a sentimental distortion of the character of Robert¹ Louis Stevenson, against displacing the man and setting up an idol, against transubstantiating flesh and blood into a sort of chocolate-cream cherub, the true lovers of men and of literature were rejoiced, even though the lady-like persons who insist that their heroes shall be flawlessly angelic were sorely grieved. Mr. Henley pleaded for the real Stevenson, whom he knew, against the ideally impossible or impossibly ideal Stevenson, whom most of his worshipers had read about rather than read in his own work. The protest startled for a time, but not for long, as the judicious soon saw that Stevenson was the greater for the peccadilloes his former friend had pointed out. Henley's "Lewis" grips us to him more firmly than the idealized creature pictured by over-enthusiastic

admirers, so that what the London *Saturday Review* characterized as a case of "literary leprosy," and what hundreds of petty paragraphers in England and America called "ghoul-
ishness," "ingratitude," and "sacrilege" has, within a few brief weeks, become recognized as a valuable service to the dead stylist and a useful contribution to the literature of biography.

✻✻ What had happened or was happening to Stevenson is in danger of happening to Eugene Field. He has been unduly worshiped by the undiscerning multitude. He has been so be-
praised that criticism of him or his work has been regarded as a crime almost equal in atrocity to "speaking disrespectfully of the equator." Field has been unrestrainedly sentimentalized about until the saccharine slaverling of his name and fame has become positively nauseating. Everything that he ever wrote—that was printable—has been reproduced in cheap form and indiscriminately lauded by those who laud everything. The banal "Tribune Primer," with its boyish vulgarities, has been sold by the hundred thousand. "Culture's Garland," a piece

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of work that stands to real literature about as a variety sketch stands towards a play like "Francesca da Rimini," has been universally read in this country. A two-volume collection of "Sharps and Flats" has been made, in which the flats predominate over the sharps, and the sharps are a composite of atrocious puns, "jolly-ings" of actors and politicians, chaffing of temporary celebrities or notorieties, and the usual "brilliant" which the paragraphing wits of half a dozen newspapers used to pass along between one another after the Danbury *News* man and the Burlington *Hawkeye* man had made paragraphing a fad about twenty-five years. There is no more dismal book in the world than this two-volume compilation of Field's work, issued about three years ago, by the Scribners. It is, of course, unfair to judge Field by these cullings from his hack work in the daily column he contributed to the *Daily News* of Chicago, or to blame him for the mistaken zeal of the friend who made the compilation. It is only just to say that many of the things that have been copiously reprinted

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since Field's death and extravagantly admired by those with no standards of literary judgment, were productions that he was ashamed of in those maturer years when he came into the possession of a faculty of taste. Field is not to be held responsible for the exaggerated esteem in which he has been held by the large class of persons whose esteem, expressed in unpunctuated, misspelled, wrongly capitalized letters, comes to almost every writer of any prominence and makes him realize what a fake is fame in this glorious country of ours.

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✪✪Lately Mr. Slason Thompson has given us his view of Field in two volumes, entitled "Eugene Field; A study in Heredity and Contradictions," (Scribners). The book is a labor of love. Mr. Thompson has something of the affectionateness and a great deal of the stupidity of Boswell. His attitude is continuously worshipful. Field appears, in his own way, to have treated Thompson at all times with much of the friendly contempt which the great lexicographer showed towards the Scotch burr which Goldsmith said some one had thrown at

Johnson and caused it to stick. A person of ordinary spirit would hardly have rejoiced, as Mr. Thompson does, over the manner in which Field imposed upon him. Mr. Thompson is in ecstasies all the time because he was allowed to pay for Field's dinners, nor does he appear to perceive that there was something not at all to be approved in the fact that Field was accustomed to entertain visiting celebrities in Chicago while Melville Stone paid the bills. Field's impecuniosity is dealt with as a sort of evidence of childishness of genius, but to the experienced reader there is a strong smack of *Harold Skimpole* suggestiveness about the Fieldian method, as Mr. Thompson all unconsciously reveals it.

✱✱Mr. Thompson gives us a wonderful wealth of detail of Field's early career in St. Louis, but that detail is unconvincing as to Field's gentleness. Field lived in those early newspaper days in St. Louis, as most other journalists of that time lived, regardless of the morrow, blithely careless of responsibilities and enjoying the tribute which Bohemianism exacted of the

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Philistine. Field left this city for Kansas City and Denver, where he distinguished himself chiefly as a practical joker of a none too refined stamp. His humor was broad and not characterized by much charity. He devoted himself to exploiting in extravagant misrepresentation actors, actresses, politicians, railroad magnates and other persons who moved about much and did much talking and thereby spread his fame. Mr. Thompson tells us that Field's classicism, of which we have heard so much, was an acquirement of his later life, but it is known, among his old associates in St. Louis, that even in those early days he had a penchant for borrowing classics from other men and of never returning them, a form of bibliomania not at all lovable. This biographer tells us one truth that is important as to Field's fame and that is, that he never cared for children generally. In the main, however, the Thompson "study" shows us Field as a very likeable fellow, without any particularly set principles, without any bump of reverence for anything whatever, without much consideration for the feelings of men,

without any conception whatever of responsibilities. He was what the newspaper boys of to-day would call a "frosty proposition" and so long as things went well with Field he had no other purpose in life than to amuse himself at the expense of others. He led a sort of kobold existence, was merry all the time, lived from hand to mouth and enjoyed his own assumption of eccentricity. Those who remember him best in the days before he was taken up and brought to Chicago cannot be said to remember him as one of deep and radiant soufulness. In fact, a man who worked with Field said to the present writer, recently, that Field did not discover his own soul until within a few years of the day he died. This criticism is unwittingly demonstrated by almost every line of Mr. Thompson's biography, and the fact that Field was the thinking, feeling man, and not the facile poseur, does not develop until the last pages wherein Mr. Thompson describes his hero's last days. Field was brilliant but hard, but he was a great mimic, not only in the matter of facial mobility, voice-mastery and gesticulation, but in liter-

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ature. He didn't believe at all in "genius." In so far as this meant that he did believe in hard work, he was right, but in so far as this meant that Field regarded the work for which, in later years, he was so highly praised, as an elaborate befooling of the public, it indicated a shallowness of sentiment that one is fain to believe will ultimately appear in the work over which so many alleged appreciators have worked themselves into a maudlin condition. Of the quality of Field's friendship for others, it is not necessary to say more than that Mr. Thompson's book shows it in its true light, as a friendship that gave off little warmth and was limited only to the easy acceptance of service and adoration and applause from others. He did have a soft spot in his heart for his guardian, Mr. Gray, but for others outside of his own family he had, so far as the record shows, little use outside of their usefulness to him. For an almost perfect picture of a man selfish and frivolous the world will doubtless not wish to look farther than this biography of Mr. Thompson's.

✿✿Mr. Thompson has not done Eugene Field

an ill-turn, in his biography. He appears to have told the truth about his hero, without exactly appreciating the trend of the truth. He has not shown Field as a bad man. That Field was not. But he does show us Field as a rather fish-like sort of person, with gifts of intellect in abundance, and with a constitutional aversion to considering the other fellow. The biographer tells us how much Field did for this actor or that actress by his fanciful paragraphs, but the fact is that, in most instances, the paragraphs were written in the spirit of the practical joker, and were designed rather to annoy the subject than to benefit him or her. One looks rather vainly for any real geniality in Field, outside of his relations toward his guardian, until the death of his son, in Europe. That seems to have been the event that awakened his soul. So far as Field was a study in heredity and contradiction, he was always the rather unsympathetic Yankee, and the only contradiction one finds is between the man and his later work. The real Field, one is almost justified in assuming, is found in the earlier, coarser, more heart-

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less work. The Field that the people have overdone as an idol came into being chiefly through his 'cute discovery that the way to reach the public most effectively was through sentiment and not through humor. He set to work deliberately to cultivate the sentimental and he did so with what success the whole world knows. He found out the trick of Beranger. He readily perceived the charm of Malory and the spell of Hans Christian Andersen, and, working on the hints he had gathered from those quarters, he produced eventually his "Little Books" of "Western Verse" and "Western Tales." That these books are echoes is not wholly to their discredit. That they are such a *tour de force* into sentiment by such a rank unsentimentalist, a congenital and cultivated unsentimentalist, is their chiefest claim to attention. There is no disputing about taste, one freely admits, but there are some of us who, in reading "Bill, the Lokil Editor," or "Margaret, a Pearl," are prone to see something like bathos. We who see that way may possibly be strabismic to a degree, but the very phrasing of the

stories or sketches is more or less of a pretense. It is necessary only to look in Mr. Thompson's biography to see that Field must have written much of this sort of thing in the same spirit in which he alluded to himself as "ye gentil knighte" when "touching" Mr. Thompson for postage stamps, or inviting himself to dine with that gentleman. Field did not take himself seriously at first. It was only when he found devotees, like Slason Thompson and Francis Wilson, that he began to fall in with their delusion. Mr. Wilson's book, "The Eugene Field I Knew," is a volume that excellently supplements the Thompson biography, even though printed before that study. Mr. Wilson certainly makes more of Field than is consistent with the facts. He sees in Field what he brought to the seeing. Mr. Wilson, furthermore, has been delivering a lecture, from time to time, in which he gives an interesting picture of Field. In his book and in that lecture Mr. Wilson does his utmost to encourage the spread of that conception of Field which results in the circumstance that nearly every city of any importance

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contains a public school named after Eugene Field. That Field was, in a sense, the American poet of childhood, cannot be denied. The people have taken up his verses and they live on the popular lips everywhere. There is no disputing the people in such matters. They know what appeals to them.

✻✻One does not complain that Eugene Field seems to be securely fixed as an immortal in this country. Cheerfully one pays tribute to the literary characteristics that have given him a hold upon the people. It is acknowledged that his child-verse and his tales are very effectively wrought, and capture a sentimental fancy. You can't criticise "Little Boy Blue," or "The Little Tyke," or "Wynken, Blynken and Nod." Their art is above criticism. They express something that exists—whether, in writing them, Field felt them or not. Field's wit and prankishness are not open to criticism either. His humor was rather harsh at times, and rasping, a humor characteristic, by the way, of Chicago. Still it is not against these things that one wishes to protest. There is no

desire to protest, either, against Mr. Wilson's eulogies of his friend.

✻✻Mr. Wilson knew Eugene Field well. Therefore he must know that there is something highly ridiculous in the contemporaneous and posthumous apotheosis of the man as "one whose heart was as a little child's." Eugene Field turned his knack at verse to good account when he bent it to the task of "catching on" with the mothers. What he thought of his "play" was best expressed when he told a friend, on the street, in Chicago, "I've got to go home now and write some mother rot"—only the word wasn't rot, but something much worse. This devotion to children was, to a great extent, a pose. It was a good pose, an effective pose. And that is all it was. Mr. Thompson's work furnishes us convincing evidence of this fact.

✻✻Eugene Field, talented as he was, clever as he was, was no good fellow. He was as chilly as an iceberg. He did not remember his friends. He did not care sincerely for people. He had very little of the real milk of human kindness in

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him. He did not respect confidences. He was something of a snob, in his later and more famous years. He cultivated a few of Chicago's codfish aristocracy, and he was not considerate of the feelings of many whom he had known in earlier and less famous years. He never hesitated to ridicule a friend and he was not addicted to remembering kindly services. He loved adulation better than he ever loved anything in the world, possibly excepting his own family, and the gentleness of him was found only when he had to conjure it up for use in a piece of verse to make mother-readers of the *News*.

✱✱We hear a great deal of the purity of Eugene Field's poetry. Those of the old-timers who knew him, know something of quite a large body of Fieldian verse that was the exact reverse of pure. Field was one of those men who delight in the coarsely, vulgarly erotic. His writings in that line are notorious, under the rose. The world of letters in America is familiar with his poem on Socrates, which has long been privately circulated as a triumph

of its kind. There are, perhaps, a dozen other "poems" of the same sort, in which to the most banal eroticism is added a scatologic and callipygic salacity that lost little of its disgustingness from being cleverly handled in rhyme. Field's *sub-rosa* writings might make a good-sized book in themselves, and the requirements of truth compel one to say that in mere technique of handling several of them are truly miraculous examples of the man's ability. They are treated with a lingering lovingness that illustrates the spirit in which he approached such subjects. Field's filth was more offensive than Lincoln's smutty stories. It was more deliberate. It was indulged in for its own sake.

✱✱ This is a matter upon which one cannot well, or safely, say more, even if one wished to do so. The only person in this country who ever dared to say this much, though he said it infinitely better, is Mr. Vance Thompson, who touched upon it trenchantly some years ago in an article, in the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. The erotic and the filthy had

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a very definite attraction for Eugene Field, an attraction to which he was not insensible, even in his later years. In estimating the man this phase of his character should be taken into consideration. One grows tired of seeing Field haloed and hearing him idolized as an angel of purity. One realizing the unction with which he was wont to handle dirty subjects with his pen, and not infrequently in conversation, is rather nauseated at the form which recognition of his ability takes when it names public schools after him. In the interest of biographic and literary truth let us have an end of this unmitigated twaddling eulogy of Eugene Field as a sort of glorified choir-boy. Let us have the man as he was. Let us see the other side of him now and then, not the side on which he was least natural, if most popular. Eugene Field was no Charles Lamb, no Tom Hood, even. He was not the "gentle" poet, except to those to whom it may have been, in one way or another, his interest to seem gentle. He was as frigid a personality—to come down to the language of the street of to-day—as ever came

over the pike, and his sincerity was always an unknown quantity with those who knew him best, in the actual world of work. He was not the paragon of kindness he has been made out. He was not the simple child of nature that some people would have us believe. He was a man who discovered the "child-and-mother game," and worked it very dexterously to the immortalization of himself.

✿✿ There need be no undue insistence in the honest biography of Eugene Field upon the aspects of his personality to which one is forced to call attention in sheer revolt against the undiscerning adulation of biographers like Messrs. Thompson and Wilson. Only let us know that there are such aspects of the man. His weakness, his smallnesses, even, for he had probably as many of the latter as of the former, are part of the record, part of the picture. They may be read between the lines in Mr. Thompson's elaborate eulogy. They do not spoil the man as a human document. On the contrary, they make it the more interesting, give it the benefit of contrasts and conflicts in the in-

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dividuality of the man. Mr. Thompson admits that there were contradictions in the man, but he did not see the real, the glaring, the offensive contradictions, or, if he saw them, he hesitated to tell us of them. Those contradictions touched on here do not utterly obscure the better side of Field. They make him more of a man. As we have been led to regard him by the indiscriminate and fulsome appreciation of his verses concerning children, he has appeared more or less of a simpering, sniveling, doll. Mr. Wilson and other friends of Eugene Field have hardly had the courage of their friendship, else they would not have been afraid to give us views of him, full, rounded and complete. Field is large enough in his work for his reputation to stand the truth. Let us not be maudlin over Field for the work at which he was wont to scoff and sneer and jeer as a pose and a pretense. Let us even name schools after him, if we will, but let us not continue to fool the people by picturing him to them as a sort of Sunday-school seraph with a facile trick of titillating the tear-ducts and a tendency toward

puling pathos. His work will stand or fall for what it is. The man, one imagines, will be able to stand so, too, and, probably, more securely as one who had a closer kinship to Rabelais and Dean Swift than to Hans Christian Andersen and William Blake, in the fairy tales of the one or the "Songs of Innocence" of the other.

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